CLAIMED AND CALLED
November 3, 2013
St. Andrew's Church, Toronto

JOHN M. BUCHANAN

Isaiah 61:1-4
Luke 4:14-30

"Is not this Joseph's son?"
Luke 4:22 (NRSV)

First sermons preached in one's home church can be precarious affairs. I remember it well. It was fifty years ago. Newly graduated and ordained as a Presbyterian minister, I was invited to preach to the congregation into which I had been baptized twenty-five years earlier and in which I had grown up. I still remember them well. Mrs. Shields, who made me leave the Junior High Sunday School class, threw me out, took me by the scruff of the neck and escorted me to the door, actually, because I wouldn't stop kicking Patsy McKinstry beneath the table. Irene Saucerman and Magdelein Bair, two formidable high school teachers who always sat together in our church, and because I was in their classes eyed me warily, suspiciously, I thought, from their back pew on Sunday morning. I was sure they were comparing notes on my behavior and performance—and I wasn't getting a very good evaluation. Miss Bair told me I talked too fast: every time I saw her she said, "Slow down." A coach was there, a YMCA leader, a youth advisor—all of whom knew far too much about me for comfort. Family were there too: grandparents, aunts and uncles and cousins who were members of other churches and took the morning off and came to our church for the grand occasion. Even old high school friends who didn't go to church at all and could not believe that I was actually an ordained minister showed up to see what would happen. My father "marked off," which means he called the crew dispatcher at the Pennsylvania Railroad and announced that he wasn't available to be called to work—an almost unheard-of event in our home—because his son was preaching.

It was an altogether auspicious, and precarious, occasion.

We all made it through the ordeal, more or less. I don't think anybody was converted that morning. The church survived. My father gently critiqued my sermon afterward by suggesting that I was far too academic and not nearly personal enough. And sure enough, Miss Bair shook my hand, looked me in the eye, and said, "You're still talking too fast. Slow down." A precarious occasion.

And so it was that Jesus came home to Nazareth one time. Ever since the day he walked into the Jordan River and was baptized by his cousin John, he had been in Galilee, miles away, and the word had come back to his hometown that he was traveling around Galilee, from village to village, teaching in the synagogues, healing the sick; that he had a group of followers, disciples, with him; and that large crowds were attracted to him. His reputation preceded him when he came home to Nazareth that day and on the sabbath went to the synagogue—the synagogue where he had grown up, where he had attended weekly on the sabbath and occasionally during the week for prayers; the place where he, with other young boys his age, learned to read and write Hebrew and perhaps where he and his friends made life difficult for some patient, nameless rabbi trying to serve God by teaching young boys Hebrew; the synagogue where everybody knew him: Joseph's son, Mary's son.

So the elders, as the custom was when there was a visiting teacher, invited him to read scripture, a text of his own choosing, and to comment, to preach a sermon. He chose a favorite passage from Isaiah:

> The Spirit of the Lord is upon me . . .;
> he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor,
> release to the captives, sight to the blind,
> freedom to the oppressed."

They loved that passage. They read themselves into it. They were the poor, oppressed, captives. Rome was the oppressor. They waited in eager anticipation for the day a savior, a liberator, would come to rally the nation, throw out the occupiers, and establish the integrity and freedom of their people, their nation, once again. He picked a good passage, but he began to get into trouble when he said, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."

What in the world was that about? Surely he doesn't mean it—that the Spirit of the Lord is upon *him*, that he is the liberator, the savior. They overlooked it, gave him a pass for youthful enthusiasm and hyperbole. "He's not the savior; he's just Joseph's son, little Jesus. We knew him when . . ." It's always precarious to preach in your home church.

Jesus should have stopped right there, left them wondering what in the world he had meant with that "Today, this scripture is fulfilled" business, enjoyed their pride and affection, and gone home for lunch with his family.

Instead , did you notice, the account takes a dangerous turn. He pushed on and told two odd little stories, reminded them actually of stories they knew, they're odd stories - about non-Israelites, non-Jews, outsiders, receiving the

grace of God. He had read his old neighbors accurately. If they were sure of anything, it was that they were God's chosen, God's elect and what that meant, they thought that was that they were in, and everyone else was not. So, on this precarious occasion, why in the world is he telling stories about a Syrian army officer and a poor pagan woman, if it is not to say a word about the sovereign grace of God, which God extends to all people, not just one people, one race, or religion for that matter, and a critique aimed at them, his own people, his old friends and neighbors, for missing the point and becoming too narrow, too rigid, too exclusive?

It's one thing to welcome a young man home and listen respectfully as he reads and speaks. It's another thing altogether when he criticizes his old friends, challenges their assumptions and the comfortable conventions by which they assure themselves that they are in and everybody else is out. That, makes them angry – who does he think he is, talking to us like that? And a friendly congregation becomes a lynch mob. They unceremoniously kick him out of the synagogue, on down the street and out of town, and almost throw him over a cliff on the way out.

Your first sermon in your home church can be precarious indeed.

The first point here—and I think we have as much difficulty with it as they did, by the way—is the sovereign grace of God, which is not confined to one people, one religion even, one set of creedal or theological affirmations within one religion even. It seems to be the nature of religion and religious people to become exclusive and to build barriers to protect the insiders and keep out the others. When radical religious exclusivists gets a little power, political power, military power, people start getting hurt. The history of the Medieval Papacy, for instance. In some places in the Middle East and Africa today, Muslim extremists will stop at nothing in the effort to rid society of infidels, and to establish the absolute, exclusive authority of Shiriah law.

No one religion has a monopoly here. Christian Crusaders, determined to rid the Holy Land of the outsider, the infidels killed so many Muslims that the streets of Jerusalem were ankle deep with their blood. And on the way through Europe those same Crusaders turned on and killed Jews.

There is a recent book on the history of the Inquisition, maybe the sorriest chapter in our history, when Christian leaders became so convinced that Church and society needed to be pure and exclusive, that torture and burning at the stake were somehow justified and thought to be just and righteous and good – for society – but also the victim who was believed to be cleansed of his errors.

No one has a monopoly. We are not torturing or executing any longer, thanks be to God, but conservative evangelical preachers continue a

rhetorical crusade, assuring non=believers, dissenters, wrong believers, that they will burn in hell; excluding, reading us and people like us, out of the Kingdom. We Christians can parse it just as finely. Condemning one another to hell, excommunicating and excluding and persecuting, reading one another out of the kingdom because of our disagreements on this and that because we are too liberal or too conservative.

But one of the most consistent motifs in the biblical story from beginning to end—and one of the strongest themes of Jesus' ministry—is the message of God's love and saving grace, which comes to and claims all people, not just a few favorites. It is a clear message of Jesus', starting that day in the Nazareth synagogue when he challenged the theological provincialism of his old neighbors and continuing right through to the end as he persists in proclaiming and demonstrating God's welcoming grace to the unclean, the marginalized, the shut out—precisely those people his religion excluded. Jesus' main concern is never who we're letting in, who we're accepting, affirming or ordaining, but who is being left out, excluded.

The gospel of Jesus Christ challenges the comfortable status quo, challenges particularly our use of religion to shut others out. The gospel of Jesus Christ is about a grace and love that knows no boundaries and is for everyone.

There is a word here, as well, about God's claim on our lives and God's call to commitment. You might say that Jesus' troubles started that day when he read the ancient words "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me" when he started to intimate that this was his vocation, his life's work. The Psalmist wrote: "You, O Lord, are my hope. . . . Upon you have I leaned from my birth: it was you who took me from my mother's womb." It is a consistent and sometimes disconcerting idea: God knows us. God has plans for us. God claims us and calls us. Some people do what they do with such grace and integrity and excellence that we say about them, "He was born for this; she was created to do this." Who they are and what they do are a perfect and complete synergy. Jazz great Dave Brubeck died recently. He was a Christian, a faithful churchman, who believed that his music was a way of praising and honoring his creator. If you ever saw Brubeck play, moving so effortlessly, smoothly from classical to modern jazz, weaving phrases from J.S. Bach, Jesu, Joy of man's Desiring, into a jazz improvisation you witnessed someone who was born to do what he was doing, whose call and vocation were planted in him from the beginning.

The biblical idea that God has something for each of us, an important role to play in God's kingdom, and which, in a mysterious way, is our own personal fulfillment, our destiny, our vocation. Some of us can earn our living at it. Others of us must earn a living in order to be and do what God calls us to be and do. For each of us, it is to live for God and God's kingdom on earth. For

each of us, regardless of how we earn our living, it is to attend to God's agenda, about which there is no mystery at all: peace, justice, compassion, and God's gracious welcome extended to all.

"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me," Jesus said, and the thing is, we believe it is true for each and every one of us. No one is excluded. No one lives outside the gracious claim and call of God: preacher, lawyer, nurse and physical therapist, mother and grandmother, artist and athlete, politician and police officer.

The invitation to all of us is to know that about ourselves—God's claim on our lives, God's call—and then to commit ourselves to it, to live it out in our daily lives.

One who did that and reflected thoughtfully on it was one of my heroes, the late William Sloane Coffin Jr. Coffin—former chaplain at Yale and minister of Riverside Church in Manhattan, civil rights and peace advocate, concert pianist, powerful preacher—was a prophet, challenging the status quo, uncompromisingly honest about his faith. It got him in trouble and, on occasion, in jail. Even when he made me uncomfortable, he made me think.

Coffin was well connected and well educated, could have written his own ticket in law or business or politics, but decided instead to be a minister. In his autobiography he describes his service as an intelligence officer during World War II; his intellectual and spiritual struggles with the big philosophic issues of the meaning and purpose of life at the dawn of the nuclear age; his exposure to the thinking of Reinhold Niebuhr, the great American theologian, and his difficult, almost reluctant decision to enter seminary.

In the middle of struggling with the all-important matter of what to do with the rest of his life: what he was born to do, he was sitting in a memorial service for a friend who had been killed in an automobile accident. Coffin was fuming at God for the injustice of life, arguing with God, and then the organist played one of the great Bach chorale preludes: "Christus Stand in Todes Band" ("Christ stands in the bonds of death"). He wrote:

> It was genuinely comforting. And it made me think that religious truths, like those of music, were probably apprehended on a deeper level than they were ever comprehended. The leap of faith was not a leap of thought after all. The leap of faith was really a leap of action. Faith was not believing without proof; it was trusting without reservation.
> (*Once to Every Man*, p. 83)

The leap of faith is not a leap of thought, but a leap of action.

God’s call is a mystery. None of us should claim too much. But the witness of scripture and church down across the centuries is that God claims each one of us, calls each one of us to discipleship and commitment, promises to give us the gifts we need to be faithful and promises to keep us forever.

The Spirit of the Lord is upon us all.

Thanks be to God.